

THE EFFECT OF CONSUMERS REVIEWS ON THE PERCEIVED LEVEL OF WINE QUALITY: A THREE-PHASE EXPERIMENT

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Extant studies claim that wine is an experiential good, which is difficult to evaluate before tasting it (Higgins, Wolf, & Wolf, 2014; Hopfer et al., 2015). In addition, the available information regarding wine quality is often difficult to interpret by an uneducated wine consumer (Drummond & Rule, 2005). To reduce risk when purchasing for the first time a new wine variety/brand, consumers use various strategies, accessing information or interpreting cues that may indicate the level of product quality (Atkin & Thach, 2012). Amongst these strategies, accessing online consumer or expert reviews represents an easy and effective option (Chocarro & Cortiñas, 2013; Gawel & Godden, 2008). The valence (positive vs negative) of the accessed review(s) may affect the perceived level of wine quality; while on the other hand, the buyer's level of wine expertise may determine his/her level of impressionability. Understanding these interdependencies are the aim of this study.

Based on the extant literature, two research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The valence of buyers' perceptions is positively correlated with the consumers' reviews.

H2: Consumers' reviews have a stronger effect on amateurs than on experienced wine drinkers.

To validate these hypotheses, a three-phase experiment was designed. The chosen wine variety is Cabernet Sauvignon. Excepting the wine variety, no other information was provided to the people involved in the experiment. Before the start of the experiment, the participants answered a short survey regarding their frequency of wine purchasing and consumption, and their perceived level of wine expertise.

In the first two phases, the participants have been invited to read five customer review statements regarding the quality of the wine they will taste; although the same wine is used in all phases, the reviews presented in the first phase are positive, while in the second phase are negative. After tasting the wine, the participants have been asked to answer the following question evaluated through a six-point Likert scale with the extreme points labelled 'Extremely bad' and 'Extremely good': 'What is, in your opinion, the quality of the wine that you just tasted?' Since both phases of the experiment were carried out with the same participants and the same wine, the second phase of the experiment was performed three weeks after the first one. Finally, in the third phase of the experiment, organized four weeks after the second phase, the same people were asked to taste the same wine, without being asked to read any customer reviews, and then to answer the same question regarding the perceived level of wine quality, as in the previous two phases.

A test experiment was already run with 15 volunteers. Depending on their answers, the participants were classified into three categories: 'centred' – those who were constant in their evaluation of the wine in all three phases (measured as good versus bad wine quality); 'easily influenced' – those who evaluated the wine quality in consensus with the review statements; and 'rebels' – those who evaluated the wine quality in contradiction to the review statements.

In the last phase of the experiment, the last two categories of participants have obviously contradicted at least one of their previous evaluations, most of them indicating in the last test phase a moderately positive wine quality. The analysis indicates that the majority of ‘centred’ customers are more frequent buyers and consumers of wine, and they also have a higher perceived level of wine expertise. The ‘rebel’ consumers are those who perceive themselves as having a good wine expertise, although this level is not validated by their pattern of wine buying and consumption. Finally, the ‘easily influenced’ consumers are those who have a low level of wine expertise, both in terms of buying/consumption patterns, and of their own characterisation.

We envisage now to realize this experiment with 40 to 50 volunteers, in order to further investigate the formulated hypotheses, and validate the results of the test experiment.

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